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Joint Inspection Unit

Knowledge management in the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Knowledge management in the United Nations system" (see A/72/325).

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Summary

The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Knowledge management in the United Nations system" (see A/72/325) examines the current knowledge environment in organizations of the United Nations system and, inter alia, identifies the good practices and challenges associated with implementing knowledge management activities as well the readiness of organizations to utilize knowledge-sharing practices in decision-making processes.

The present note reflects the views of organizations of the United Nations system on the recommendations provided in the report. The views have been consolidated on the basis of inputs provided by member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which welcomed the report and supported some of its conclusions.

I. Introduction

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Knowledge management in the United Nations system" examines the current knowledge environment in organizations of the United Nations system and, inter alia, identifies the good practices and challenges associated with implementing knowledge management activities as well the readiness of organizations to utilize knowledge-sharing practices in decision-making processes.

II. General comments

2. Organizations of the United Nations system welcome the report, recognizing that knowledge-based environments lead to better decision-making and increased effectiveness, productivity and quality and thus improved overall performance. They find the report to be relevant and timely, noting in particular the inclusion of knowledge management in General Assembly resolution 71/243 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, and believe it will help mainstream knowledge management within and across United Nations organizations, especially in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Organizations find that the report offers a set of useful official and soft recommendations which can strengthen knowledge management as well as good practices that can foster greater knowledge-sharing across the United Nations. They also note that sharing of good practice was further fostered by the Knowledge for Development: Global Partnership Conference, on knowledge management, co-organized by the Joint Inspection Unit in Geneva in April 2017. In addition, they support the report's emphasis on the "human" element of knowledge management, beyond knowledge management systems and processes, and recognition that human capital is seen as one of the prevailing factors in the knowledge management process, which is a "participative process" by definition.

4. Organizations express appreciation that the report acknowledges the need to analyse the demand for staff expertise, which is already an emerging area of work in line with the knowledge management strategies in several organizations.

5. While appreciative of the report overall, organizations highlighted areas that can benefit from further analysis. They note that one purpose of the report was to review progress since the previous Joint Inspection Unit review in 2007 and observe that a number of the recommendations from the previous review were still not fully implemented or that past progress had been reversed. It would have been helpful if there had been more reflection in the report on what lessons could be learned from this to increase the likelihood that the current set of recommendations will be realistic and actually implemented. In particular, the issues of leadership support and organizational incentives for knowledge generation, sharing and use are not well covered in the report but are critical to this work.

6. Organizations observe that the report rightly draws attention to the need to develop stronger approaches to measuring the impact of knowledge management. However, while the report provided examples, these were primarily process indicators and the report would have benefited from the inclusion of guidance on measuring or documenting how knowledge management activities contribute to broader organizational goals, such as in the context of the 2030 Agenda. Such guidance would not only help strengthen the argument for greater investment, it would also offer a way of identifying approaches that add the most value.

7. In addition to their comments on the content of the report, organizations offered additional thoughts on the subject of knowledge management more generally. In this respect, some organizations emphasized the need to recognize the challenges inherent in strategically, systematically and efficiently developing, organizing, sharing and integrating knowledge, while involving all relevant stakeholders. They stress that, in efforts to implement knowledge management/sharing the degree of culture change required should not be underestimated and that for organizations that do not already have established knowledge management strategies and programmes, the incorporation of knowledge management skills and knowledge-sharing abilities into daily work habits can take considerable time.

8. Finally, organizations note that, since there are clear overlaps between information management and knowledge management, particularly with regard to establishing processes that ensure that the right information or knowledge gets to the right people at the right time, a coordination mechanism should be worked out involving all those entities that have an interest in those two areas.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should develop knowledge management strategies and policies aligned with the mandate, goals and objectives of their respective organizations, by the end of 2018. Such strategies should be based on an assessment of current and future knowledge management needs and include measures for implementation.

9. Organizations support the recommendation, noting that knowledge management strategies support institutional strategic plans by ensuring that high-quality knowledge is generated, acquired, shared and used by staff and partners, thus contributing to better programme design and implementation as well as operational efficiency.

10. However some organizations observe that, in practice, organizations differ quite significantly in how knowledge management work is organized, noting that in organizations with decentralized knowledge management functions a formal strategy might not be useful. Instead, a lighter knowledge management framework that sets out high-level principles and goals and articulates how the different parts of the organization align behind them might be more appropriate.

Recommendation 2

The Secretary-General, in consultation with the Senior Management Group, should develop at least a minimum set of knowledge management guidelines for the United Nations Secretariat, based on best practices and experiences in departments as well as in United Nations funds, programmes and specialized agencies, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), by the end of 2018.

11. Organizations support the recommendation, noting the value of leveraging the experiences and best practices of other United Nations funds, programmes and specialized agencies and that a set of minimum standards and guidelines will enable better cross-organizational collaboration in knowledge management and knowledge-sharing.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should take incremental measures aimed at embedding knowledge management skills and knowledge-sharing abilities in their respective staff performance appraisal systems, annual work plans, job descriptions and organizational core competences, by the end of 2020.

12. Organizations support the recommendation, noting that its implementation can encourage workers to create and share knowledge and to frame clear accountabilities for more effective performance management with regard to knowledge management skills and abilities.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should establish norms and procedures for the retention and transfer of knowledge from retiring, moving or departing staff, as part of the organizations' succession planning processes.

13. Organizations support the recommendation, noting that the risk of knowledge retention is particularly challenging for those entities with high staff mobility and/or turnover.

Recommendation 5

The Secretary-General should take measures to optimize the potential of the United Nations System Staff College Knowledge Centre for Sustainable Development by, inter alia, requesting the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the United Nations University (UNU) and the United Nations System Staff College Knowledge Centre for Sustainable Development to jointly design and conduct training programmes on knowledge management adapted to the holistic principles underlying the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Such training programmes should promote, in an integrated way, the management of knowledge produced and intended for use by all stakeholders interested in or associated with the activities of the United Nations system.

14. Organizations support the recommendation, noting that its implementation supports the development of a minimum set of skills and capabilities across different United Nations system organizations to support the holistic, integrated and collaborative approach of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, fostering cross-organizational collaboration to achieve better outcomes and knowledge-sharing.

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations with long-standing and comprehensive experience in knowledge management should take the lead in introducing in the agenda of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) an item dedicated to knowledge management so as to provide an opportunity for sharing, at a strategic level, experiences, good practices and lessons learned, with a view to gradually developing a common, system-wide knowledge management culture.

15. Organizations support the recommendation, noting that many United Nations system organizations have been developing and improving their knowledge

management in recent years and that accumulated knowledge, good practices and lessons learned should be shared across all United Nations system organizations in order to avoid duplication and accelerate the pace for those who are in the process of developing and enhancing their knowledge management capabilities.

Recommendation 7

The General Assembly should include in its agenda an item or sub-item dedicated to knowledge management in the United Nations system and request that a report be submitted by the Secretary-General, with contributions from members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), on system-wide best practices and initiatives in the area of knowledge management that support the holistic, integrated and collaborative approach of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

16. Noting that it is directed to the General Assembly, organizations support the recommendation, as it provides a valuable contribution for knowledge management development and improvement through cross-organizational collaboration.